

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 1 | Issue 4

Article 8

10-1-1984

Gutting, RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM

George I. Mavrodes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Mavrodes, George I. (1984) "Gutting, RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND RELIGIOUS SCEPTICISM," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol1/iss4/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

Religious Belief and Religious Scepticism, by Gary Gutting, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982. Pp. 192.

Reviewed by GEORGE I. MAVRODES, University of Michigan.

"True religious faith," Gary Gutting says, "is in fact a religious scepticism that deflates the pretensions of both belief and nonbelief." (p. 9) This book is an expansion and discussion of this thesis. Gutting's main positive conclusion is that "the argument from religious experience does establish the existence of a good and powerful being concerned about us, and thus justifies a central core of religious belief." (p. 8) The argument for this, however, is largely confined to the final chapter. The rest of the book is devoted mostly to arguing that religious belief is in need of justification (against, e.g. Wittgenstein and Plantinga), and in rejecting some other attempts to justify it (e.g., Basil Mitchell's "cumulative case" argument). Along the way, Gutting argues his other main conclusion, "that the sort of religious belief I find justified falls far short of the claims of traditional religions and that detailed religious accounts of reality are nearly as suspect as nonreligious accounts." (pp. 8,9)

Gutting formulates the positive evidence which he finds persuasive in terms of an argument from religious experience. The experience he has in mind is not that of spectacular "visions," etc., nor the ineffable and undifferentiated unity of some mystics. It is, rather, a sense of the divine presence, a consciousness of a being of power and goodness and love who cares for the world and for oneself. This sort of experience, Gutting claims, is very widespread, common in diverse cultures and historical periods, and it is probably the root of the religious faith of most ordinary believers.

Gutting develops the argument here in a way which is reminiscent of C. D. Broad's briefer treatment (in *Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research*). Drawing on C. B. Martin for "an essentially correct account of the role of experience," he summarizes that account as follows:

(1) an "of-X" experience is veridical only if, supposing it to be veridical, we should expect, in suitable circumstances, the occurrence of certain further experiences; (2) if these further experiences do not occur (given the suitable circumstances), we have no basis for accepting the experience as veridical; (3) if, in the relevant circumstances, the experiences occur, we do have a basis for accepting the experience as veridical; (4) if there is some reason for questioning the veridicality of the experience, then appeal to further expected experiences is needed before accepting the experience as veridical. (p. 151)

It seems clear that, in this account, the main burden is borne by the repeatability of the experience and related experiences. And, says Gutting, "for some religious

experiences, all these expectations are fulfilled to a very high degree...It seems, then, that we can argue that religious experiences of God's presence do establish his existence. The experiences themselves give *prima facie* warrant to the claim that he exists, and the fulfillment of the expectations induced by the assumption that the experiences are veridical provides the further support needed for ultimate warrant." (pp. 152, 153) And Gutting then goes on to refute certain challenges (e.g., that of Freud) to the veridicality of such experiences.

What beliefs such experiences warrant is another matter. Gutting observes that the propositional content justified here is minimal, far below the doctrinal content of any well-developed religion. But he also holds that minimal theism is not a viable religion. Religion needs a much richer account of God's nature, of his relation to the world and to his people, and so on. This is the "outer belt" of religious belief, which surrounds the "core" of minimal theistic belief. And to be genuinely religious, one needs to assent to *some* outer belt, i.e., to immerse oneself in some particular religious tradition. Can that immersion be warranted?

Here Gutting appeals to a distinction between "decisive" and "interim" assent. When I accept a belief decisively, then I feel no need for any further epistemic investigation in connection with it. I may still argue it, etc., for the benefit of other people, and I could abandon it if sufficient contrary evidence appeared, but (for the present at least, and for myself at least) I feel no need of any further inquiry into its truth. In the case of interim assent, however, I accept the belief while at the same time acknowledging the need for further investigation of it. And Gutting holds that we can accept the core of minimal theism decisively, while giving interim assent to the rich outer belt of belief associated with our own religious tradition.

But how is an interim assent warranted? Apparently not, in the religious case anyway, by appealing to the probable truth of the belief. We do not have more reason for accepting the outer belt of Christian belief, for example, than that associated with Islam or Hinduism. ("We know just enough to call into question all claims to have discovered any such meaning." p. 179) But, Gutting holds, we can defend our interim beliefs, though not our decisive beliefs, by appealing to a principle of methodological conservatism. So Hindus are justified in their Hindu beliefs, Christians in their Christian beliefs, and so on.

Gutting's principle of methodological conservatism is (MC) If A believes p and p is epistemically indeterminate for him, then he is entitled to believe p. (p. 100) And p is indeterminate for A in case the relevant evidence does not entitle A to a belief in p or to a belief in not-p.

This principle sounds much like William James' "Will to Believe" thesis, with two exceptions. It does not incorporate James' restrictions about the forced, momentous, etc., character of the options. And (MC) includes, while James

does not include, the “conservative” introductory clause, “if A believes p.”

Gutting gives two arguments in support of (MC). First, all of us have many interesting and controversial beliefs for which we do not have (and cannot reasonably acquire) anything like sufficient evidence. But a life of successful action in the world requires a large stock of just such beliefs. If, then, we are not to be “opportunistic vacillators or else mere onlookers” we must have such beliefs despite the fact that they are epistemically indeterminate for us. And second, “the interest of truth would be far better served by the lively conflict of firmly held beliefs than it would be by a general withdrawal from commitment on controversial issues...So the best policy in the interests of truth is to allow, but not require, those who believe a proposition...to believe it even though it is epistemically indeterminate for them.” (p. 102)

There are two curious features in this line of argument. The first is that there is nothing at all in it which tends to support the *conservatism* of (MC). Both the pragmatic need for controversial beliefs, and way in which such beliefs serve the “interest of truth” (I suppose that means that they conduce to vigorous discussions, etc., which may lead to the discovery of the truth), could justify my *adopting* a belief where I had none before as well as they can justify my *continuing* in a belief I already hold. Furthermore, it seems plausible to suppose that, in certain cases, these considerations would justify my *abandoning* a belief and *replacing* it with its opposite. For I might notice that the partisans who oppose my position on some controversial topic are few and outnumbered, so few that they cannot well uphold their end of the discussion. Consequently, the interest of truth is suffering. Gutting’s second argument would then entitle me (though it might not require me) to abandon my previous belief and to adopt its opposite, in order to shore up the discussion on that side.

If we are at all attracted to (MC), then, I cannot see why we should not delete its initial, conservative, clause. One of the differences between Gutting and James will thus disappear.

The second curious feature is that Gutting’s arguments would seem to support, in a plausible way, the holding of *decisive* as well as *interim* beliefs, even when they are epistemically indeterminate. Gutting himself denies this (and therefore he must look for some other warrant for a decisive belief in minimal theism). But his reason seems to me to be mistaken. He observes that one who accepts a belief decisively thinks that no further discussions are “epistemically necessary; that is, necessary for the project of determining truth.”(p. 105) And he apparently feels that this is incompatible with believing p “because doing so is likely to contribute to effecting a discussion with a maximal chance of arriving at a correct determination of p’s truth.”(p. 106) But he also holds that “someone who decisively assents to p may of course take part in discussions of p’s truth and even think that such discussions are needed—e.g., to lead others to believe p.”(p.

105) And if this is so, then it is hard to see what the alleged incompatibility amounts to.

What could expressions such as "the interest of truth," "the project of determining truth," and so on, mean if they do not refer to human beings discovering some truth, acquiring good reasons for believing some truth, etc.? Surely what the decisive believer holds is that *he* personally has no need of further discussion and investigation on this topic. But he can well hold that further discussion and investigation is necessary for a widespread and general determination of the truth on this topic. Just what sorts of belief will best contribute to such discussions is perhaps an empirical question. But it is not implausible to suppose that such discussions will be most vigorous and penetrating if some of the participants hold their beliefs in the decisive manner. In fact, this benefit may well accrue even if those decisive believers are mistaken about whether they themselves are in epistemic need of further investigation.

In a similar way, Gutting discounts the import of his pragmatic argument for this topic by simply observing that "the prudential or moral goods to be attained by religious belief do not require decisive assent." (p. 106) No evidence is given for this claim. Here again it would seem to be an empirical question as to whether it is decisive or interim belief which best serves the man who must steel himself to leap over a chasm, or to choose one path rather than another on the stormy mountain. Or (perhaps a more interesting case) is it decisive or interim assent which is best for the woman who chooses this man rather than that for her husband? It is, at any rate, not totally implausible to suppose that there are some affairs of life, maybe some affairs of religious significance, in which we would be better off (pragmatically, at least) with decisive rather than with interim beliefs.

If we are not attracted by (MC), Gutting's principle of methodological conservatism, we will not find in this book any support for any religious belief beyond minimal theism. And this, as Gutting observes, is not sufficient for a viable religion. Without (MC), therefore, the argument of this book leaves religion in desperate straits. If Gutting's arguments for (MC) persuade us, on the other hand, then we will be hard put not to find in them a warrant for much more than Gutting allows, a decisive belief in much of the detailed doctrine of some religious tradition.

Subjectivity and Religious Belief, by **Stephen C. Evans**. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982. Pp. 221.

Reviewed by LOUIS P. POJMAN, The University of Mississippi.

Beginning with the observation that religious belief is closely bound up with